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New borders and new questions in ethnography

The perspectives at the turn of the millennium

Introduction: on the past of borders

It is well known that in the whole of Europe political and cultural borders do not coincide. This goes for Finland as well as for the Laplanders. Finland (too) lies on the border where West and East, western Christianity and eastern orthodoxy meet in Europe (Vilkuna). With regards to its political position and its borders, Finland, like Hungary, had gone through many changes, and defended its eastern borders with varying success.

The separate existence of political and cultural borders is especially characteristic of the Carpathian Basin. In the medieval Hungarian state there lived from the very beginning a sizeable non-Hungarian-speaking population, expanded through the centuries by large groups of invited and immigrant groups (*Jászok, Kuns*, Germans, Jews, Greeks, Armenians, etc.) (Bogyay 1990). In modern times, at the time of consolidation in the 18th century, Hungary became a steadily multi-ethnic country within the Habsburg Empire (Frisnyák 1996).

The twentieth century has seen a greater opening of the borders and a movement of larger masses of people than ever before. Between 1917 and 1947 the officially declared changes in the country's borders numbered around half a dozen, and in addition, certain territories have changed hands even more often (Palotás 1998; Sallai 1995). All this has effected not only the border regions but also the provinces, lying deep within the country, whose inhabitants could never have imagined that one day, overnight, a state border would separate them from their relatives living in a neighbouring town.

The often serious tensions arising from the existence and the crossings of linguistic, cultural and political borders were never eased successfully in the multi-ethnic structures of the empire, nor in those nation states that were created after the Trianon Peace Treaty, and after World War II. In general, it is true to say that before World War I, i.e. in the days of the Habsburg monarchy, the significance of the borders was hardly comprehensible for a simple man living in an "average" Hungarian village or township (Fejtő 1988). On the other hand, after 1920, the everyday lives of people in the entire Eastern-Middle European region became more and more effected by

state borders (Éger 1997; Király 1995). The internal linguistic, cultural and religious borders were already much more tangible. In respect of border issues, neighbours were suing each other in hundreds of villages throughout at least two centuries. The depositions and other documents surviving from these times are today precious historical and ethnographical sources. Well-defined cultural borders separated the peasantry of the villages from the bourgeoisie, the artisans, the merchants and the intellectuals of the towns. Budapest, the capital, with its rapidly developing infrastructure and greatly assimilated bourgeoisie of German and Jewish origin could be considered a separate entity within the country.

For a long time, ethnography too has been contributing in its own way to making these connections and details well known (Hofer 1996). One might say that the beginning, or even the origin of ethnographical research lies in the recognition that people on the "other side" are *different* from us.

On the rearrangement of borders

Nowadays, the questions related to borders are raised in different ways, and so ethnography too has to face new tasks.

Traditional ethnography, although by no means oblivious to the existence and significance of borders, did not have to encounter those processes by that lately have given radically *new meanings* to *political* and *cultural* borders (Felföldi & Sándor 1999). What we are witnessing today is the strengthening of certain borders, and the weakening or dislocation of others, while some are filled with new symbolic contents (Jeggle 1994).

It is by now a cliché that the world has "shrunk" around us. A state border is less and less of an obstacle in choosing a place of living, a job, or a partner for marriage; there is more and more room for what is referred today as multiculturalism (Korff 1993). For many, however, the shrunken world is present not through personal experience but through the second-hand information of others. The media with its opinion forming power is assuming an ever larger role in our orientation (Bausinger 1995; Feischmidt 1997).

The formation of media induced opinions and beliefs about distant parts of the world deserves an ethnographical-anthropological analysis. Similar attention should be paid to the more traditional localities held together by community and kinship, to see what basis their cognitive structure can provide for the understanding and the processing of the cognitive structure imported from the media. The question is how geographic mobility and travel are becoming assets, how different groups view those for whom geographic mobility is an everyday experience (Fejős 1998). Sometimes, one has the impression that in this respect there are considerable divisions among people. Of course, these divisions are not permanent (as are others), but are nonetheless clearly discernible and can separate larger populations just as much as the categories of "elite"and "folk".

The changes resulting from the political, military and economic reorganisation of Europe in the past ten to twelve years raise new questions. A number of countries have regained their sovereignty in Eastern Europe. It

is not simply an ideological-political, or diplomatic fact that Soviet soldiers are no longer existent in Hungary. For millions it is a highly relevant emotional and existential question. The related and obviously strongly stratified mental structure has so far not been analysed or even considered from an ethnographic point of view.

The borders of the one time enemy NATO are now, after Hungary's joining, stretching along the southern and eastern borders of our country. Belonging to this system of alliance is not just a matter of security, but also a source of menace (on the south) and obscure fears and anxieties (on the east).

In the past ten years, three of Hungary's neighbouring states have broken up into their constitutive parts: Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union have done this peacefully, while Yugoslavia, to our south, has disintegrated and shrunk to its present size in the course of a long drawn out war. The war forced the population of traditionally Hungarian regions to evacuate, (for instance, the people of *Kórógy* had to flee to Hungarian refugee camps to return to their village only years later). Publicists, journalists, and occasionally political scientists and sociologists have been occupying themselves with these questions, but I think ethnography and anthropology also have something to say about the new types of networking strategies and social structures gaining shape under the changing conditions.

Ethnic Hungarians in the neighbouring countries live within a great variety of political structures which are, every three or four years, subject to change, depending on the outcome of parliamentary and local elections. This has an indirect effect on their living conditions, their prospects, and the extent of their modernisation and their propensity to strike out towards Hungary and other countries with the intention of finding temporary or permanent jobs there (Bíró 1992).

Although it would to be too much to speak of the "evaporation" of political borders, it is an undeniable fact that these days, relations between Hungarians separated by borders are more open and more intense than ever time before. However, for the Hungarians scattered in different countries, the possibilities of keeping in touch with the countries of Europe are becoming more varied. There is a satellite TV station (*Duna* TV) with its border-transcending programming. Links between towns and cities in the form of sister-towns are coming into existence.

All this exerts an influence on the often cited "cultural unity" of the Hungarians as well, although so far we know little about this. The greater permeability of the borders is directing most attention to the marginal regions of the linguistic community, to the lives of isolated valleys, high-mountain villages, traditional places of pilgrimage. The fact that these once traditional worlds are being increasingly modernised, and adapted to new historical circumstances has not so far become a topic for ethnography. This is even more so when it comes to the different or common cultural experiences of people living in separate parts of the Hungarian-speaking territory. There is a tacit assumption in ethnography (and evidently elsewhere too) that the existence of many idiosyncratic features leaves the *essential unity* of 'being Hungarian' untouched (Balassa 1989). It is clear, however, that the Hungarian communities of the Austrian Burgenland, the scattered hamlets and villages

of Slavonia, or South Transylvania, and the Hungarians of *Szekler's Land* living in one concentrated unit have all chosen different ways to assimilate. This shows a marked *difference* co-existing with the essential unity (Hadas 1994; Éger 1997).

It is with this in mind that one can interpret and research, as I have been doing so for a longer time, the Pentecost pilgrimage of *Csíksomlyó* (Romania, Eastern part of Transylvania) which has become an important national and religious holiday since 1990. It has been often said that by participating in these pilgrimages one has a chance to meet, in a peaceful and festive setting, with the totality of the Hungarian people (Mohay 1996). Regardless of their formalised and symbolic character, the emotional, mobilising force of these holiday encounters cannot be denied.

Borders can be changed not only between countries but within the countries as well. The merging of previously separate localities, the promotion of large villages to town level, or the break-up of townships into independent villages: these are events certainly deserving analysis. It would be an expression of greater appreciation of ethnographical and anthropological expertise if these disciplines could have a hearing in the preliminary phases of dealing with the above issues, before decisions are made.

Turning our attention now from political to cultural borders, we find ourselves surrounded by concepts that are worn-out, almost hackneyed by heavy use, such as, globalisation, multinational companies, international crime, weapon and drug trafficking, computer networks, information-industry, migration, refugee exodus, regionalism.

It is beyond dispute that anyone wishing to examine, even superficially, the effect of all these on the self-understanding of a discipline, would get involved in a hopeless enterprise since whole libraries have been written on this subject, and in many languages too. One has to reckon with one's *own* borders before speaking here. Following the traditions of ethnography, I would like to point out that here we are talking about events and processes that shape the *life of real human beings*, not just society in general. What we have to consider is the way all of this forms and transforms the system of human relations and human network (in the family, at the workplace, in local communities, etc.).

In the modern world there has been a gradual erosion of all those borders and boundaries that had previously placed people on a higher or lower rank of the social ladder. It is now commonly accepted that such hierarchical ranking among humans is wrong. Authority and everything based on it, or related to its presence or consequences, has become archaic in public discourse and is avoided as such. I hazard the opinion that while modern society has successfully expelled authority, it is suffering from its absence. It is enough to remind ourselves of the pop-star culture to see how deep and abiding the need is on both sides to admire other humans.

I consider it an important consequence of the modern world's *individualisation* that while many sharp divisions separating individuals and groups of individuals from each other have disappeared, many others have replaced them. What else could these be than cultural borders? These newly arising boundaries are sometimes just as hard to traverse as the previously existing

caste-like social ones. If, on occasion, one has the impression that such modern crossings are even harder to perform, that is, perhaps, because the technique of border crossing or even trespassing could be perfected during the long history of the hierarchical system. When a city dweller addressed a farmhand, both of them had a fairly good idea of what they, respectively could expect; there were no great surprises. These days, while we value autonomy and tolerance so highly, we often find it hard to communicate: here, the technique of border crossing is still in need of improvement.

Another reason to keep the disappearance of hierarchical boundaries in mind is that the science of ethnography and anthropology were born at a time when such divisions and boundaries were still very sharp and obvious to everyone involved. This circumstance effects the methodology of these sciences, especially with regards to fieldwork. We are thinking here of the view, commonly shared within the discipline, that wherever a researcher sets foot and starts asking questions, he or she can safely count on getting answers.

The fading of certain cultural borders means, among other things, that *global* cultural patterns have gained ground, becoming, almost imperceptibly, part of our everyday lives. McDonalds, Walt Disney, Hollywood movies, Coca-Cola, Brazilian soap operas, etc., I think we all know what I am referring to (Ariès 2000; Fejős 2000; Szabó 1996). It is hardly possible to stem the tide of the expanding multinational companies by political means in a country striving to be admitted to the European Union. It is also hard to check the flow of international crime and drug-trafficking which presents an increasing threat to our children in cities and in smaller communities as well. Where, a few decades ago, the ethnographer used to research children games, now drugs and money are changing hands in the village discos. There are those who look at this as a kind of cultural colonisation, and they may be right. But here, I do not wish to discuss the economic or social aspects of globalisation; among economists and sociologists these will be topics of debate for a long time to come.

What does deserve attention from an ethnographical point of view is the shifting cultural stratification, which is currently modifying our world-perception dominated by entrenched patterns. The role of the oral culture is being re-evaluated: formerly, one of the most visible lines of division between the elite and the masses had run along the use of written, versus oral culture. The twentieth century has created a new cult of the orality in radio, in television, on records and cassettes, and later, on CDs, making it possible to popularise a great number of cultural products and patterns. As a result, the marked boundaries formerly separating the elite from the masses have been blurred.

Among the meta-languages, computer "language" has spread wide; the dissemination of standards and operating systems led to a level of unification unheard of before. It is fashionable these days to bring up the subject of the Internet. I am not aware of anyone – in Hungary at least – taking a closer look at the ethnographical and anthropological aspects of the new type of literacy emerging in "chat groups" and mailing lists. But it is worth mentioning that these days the Internet extends a forum to even those places

which the ethnographer today still visits as part of his "ethnographical data-collecting": for example in the Franciscan monastery of *Csíksomlyó*, the seventy years old Franciscan Father who, as prior, helps organise the century-old rite of the pilgrimage, is complaining about the interruption of the classical organ music he had downloaded from the net.

The most obvious and most spectacular forms of border crossings are, naturally, those having to do with *migration*. This is a subject that ethnography traditionally deals with: it has become a sub-field, effecting both community history and population history, and it can show numerous significant results. Nonetheless, it must be said that until now, political science and sociology had more to say about the trends of migration taking place around us in our world than did ethnography. We know very little about the lives of expatriate workers, seasonal workers, and mass-movements lacking any group-allegiance or institutional support, and about the cultural repercussions of all this. And yet, there is evidence to show that in the creation and operation of sister communities reaching across state borders immigrants from the chosen sister community sometimes play significant roles.

An even less researched topic of ethnography in our country is the question of *refugees*. It is remarkable that it is mostly our colleagues abroad who have dealt with this subject, which does not even turn up in the index of the 1995–6 ethnographical bibliography.

A new type of border alteration is the result of re-examining, from a novel point of view, the questions of the *past*. Here, I am not only thinking of including new sources, but also of the current sensitivity to previously ignored factors; the present, as it were, is searching for its own beginnings and roots. The ever-increasing interest in our past and history is a sign of a desire on the part of many people to see more clearly. Here, undoubtedly, lies an important region over which ethnography has jurisdiction.

In the modern-post-modern world, a portion of the disappearing borders are precisely those, which in traditional societies (the main "territories" of ethnography and anthropology), were strong, that is, those that worked and had an effective influence on the lives of people and communities. What do I have in mind? The *value-boundaries*: the clearly visible borders between the good and bad, the acceptable and the unacceptable, the admirable and the despicable. What do we see today? That in many situations and in turns of speech the difference between good and bad is simply blurred; it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between normal and deviant. We had to get used to the idea that whatever is useful from one perspective is downright harmful from another, or simply inconsequential. Viewing it from here: it is good, from there: it is bad. Those higher standards and paradigms that used to help in deciding which view had it right have ceased to possess any authority.

It is, of course, the principle of *value neutrality* that we are discussing here; a principle that, at the turn of the century, became one of the cornerstones of the methodology of social sciences (Weber 1995). It is important to remind ourselves that while this principle is effective *within* the scope of science, in areas other than science value-references certainly have a place, even in the world of decisions and consequences directly following from the results of

scientific research. Indeed, value neutrality means only that in scientific methodology and in statements, the researcher strictly observes the principle of always abstracting from his/her emotions and prejudices, while following the rules of logic and methodological tradition in collecting and analysing data, and in drawing conclusions; and furthermore, that in the end he/she makes his/her value preferences clear. Far be it from me to say that, should one's conscience so dictate it, one should be forbidden, in the name of some misinterpreted value neutrality, to give a helping hand to those in need (even the helping hand of science if that is called for). Nor do I believe that we could not strive *within* science to find truth, and outside it to represent it in an authentic way.

On the new borders of ethnography

In this aritcle, so far, my intention was to reflect to newly arisen questions. In posing its questions and looking for the answers, ethnography must also be confronted with the limitations and boundaries of its own discipline. It is almost certain that in doing this, its methodology of research, its relationship with other branches of knowledge, the preparations for the discipline, and university training, will all have to face new challenges (Niedemüller 1992).

New questions usually arise in two different ways in ethnography, and also in other sciences. First, at times when some sort of intellectual inventory has to be made; this is usually occasioned by an anniversary, or an external request. Second B and perhaps this is more fruitful B, at times when, as a result of having answered a number of challenges, and having accumulated sufficient experience and theories, new ideas crystallise in the mind of the scientist who (sometimes fuelled by personal motives) is spurred into action.

In the past ten-fifteen years in Hungary, such inventories, and also debates, have followed each other in, if you will, a "dense" sequence. If, in spite of this, professional debates and exchanges of ideas still seem "rare" that is perhaps due to the lack of overlap between the findings of different forums, which thus could not mature. No new research work was inspired, which could have attempted to find concrete answers to the new questions raised on a theoretical level (Kunt & Szarvas 1993; Paládi-Kovács 1990).

It is well to remember that ethnography has never been shut up in the world of its own discipline. This is true in two different ways: on the one hand, it has never barricaded itself behind the walls of its own problems, interests, or "audience", and on the other, it has always maintained rich inter-disciplinary relationships stretching in all directions. In one of his articles, László Kósa writes about Hungarian ethnography of a hundred years ago: "At the cradle of our ethnography a whole group of sciences stood, and with these – in my opinion still preserving an advantageous feature – the relation in those days was strong and healthy." He cites the examples of folklore research, the sciences of literary theory and literary history, linguistics, ethnography of objects, archaeology and cultural history, geography and statistics, physical anthropology and even sociology. (Kósa 1996, 15–16). The relations with other disciplines was still lively later on,

with geography for instance, and even with medicine and theology. Nor can we say anything worse about the present conditions: the inter-disciplinary relations of ethnography are especially open – and so they should be – in the direction of anthropology, sociology and history.

What gives the occasional impression to some observers, it could be asked, that ethnography is an introverted science squeezed within its narrow limits? The answer to this is that there are many of those who know very little about its subject matter, its methodology, its lessons and results. Another reason might be its institutional and organisational fragmentation and, furthermore that (in spite of every effort) ethnography is still not taught in schools; the possibility to transmit a body of systematically organised knowledge is still lacking. It is not the public's interest that is missing: in the nineties, the number of those who could receive a university education in ethnography has increased by many times throughout the country. There are people on every level of the educational system who seriously think that sacrificing time and energy for the acquisition and transmission of ethnographical knowledge is a worthwhile endeavour. It is ironic that while the interest is steady or even increasing, the institutional conditions of satisfying this interest is limited; on the other side stands a long line of young scientists with little, or no prospect of finding a job.

It would go beyond the scope of this paper if I attempted to give even a sketchy account of those developments in Hungarian ethnography research which hold out hope regarding the issues I have been discussing here. There are a good number of initiatives and results that are approximating, or straining against inter-disciplinary boundaries (Lukács 1994; Szûcs 1998; Ambus & Elter & Nobilis 1999). A few examples will have to do, more as an illustration than a genuine proof of my above claim.

A doctoral dissertation, for instance, examined the subculture of the *Kaposvár* youth, focusing on their pop music and their educational-cultural level. (Szapu 2000). Another dissertation took for its topic the ethnographical source value of the history of medicine literature (Deáky 1999). Yet another dissertation is in the writing, dealing with the meta-communication in the religious practices of Greek Catholicism (Szabó 2000). University term papers, turned into publications, examine the everyday dietary rituals of the Jewry of Munkács (Rékai 1997); the inner social ties and network of the musician gypsies of Transylvania (Kertész 1999); the sawing skills of folk artists in a village of *Kalotaszeg,* and the marketing of their products (Fülöp 1998); and finally, the symbolic role soccer plays in the national consciousness (Bali 1998).

All these works (and others, not mentioned here, e.g. Fejős 2000; Ambrus et a. 1999, Borbély & Czégény 1999; Lukács 1994; Szûcs 1998) portray an innovative curiosity, and one can only hope that these will mature into larger research projects, exerting a beneficial influence on the field, and earning a greater respect for the whole of ethnography in our country and abroad. This might inspire others to consider the question more carefully: does the outside world pose questions to ethnography? And if so, what sort of questions, and with what expectations attached? Furthermore: does ethnography itself pose questions to the outside world? And if so, what sort of questions, and if

not, why not? And finally, can ethnography hold on to its ability to be sensitive to users of other languages, be those the members of other scientific fields or the representatives of life style, mentalities, religious traditions, or other expressions of the human community.

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